

# Kant's Concept of Spontaneity within the Tradition of Aristotelian Ethics

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In *Kant über Freiheit als Autonomie*, Gerold Prauss suggests that in the middle of the 1760's beside Rousseau's influence on the concept of freedom in Kant's moral writings, it is possible to find also the Aristotelian notion of spontaneity.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the paper is to contextualize by means of the methodology of the *Quellengeschichte* Kant's concept of spontaneity within the tradition of Aristotelian ethics.<sup>2</sup> In the first part of the paper I analyze Aristotle's concept of spontaneity and in the second its reception from Renaissance to Kantian philosophy. The third and fourth parts deal with spontaneity in Kant's moral writings with the exemption of the *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, which involves and implies a much larger set of considerations on teleology and metaphysics. The conclusion is a critical assessment of Kant's appropriation of Aristotle's spontaneity.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Aristotle's Concept of Spontaneity

The term spontaneity derives from the Latin noun *spontaneitas*, which is the translation of two Greek words: *automatos* and *ekoúsios*. *Automatos* concerns something capable of self-movement whereas *ekoúsios* is an act

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<sup>1</sup> GERLOD PRAUSS, *Kant über Freiheit als Autonomie*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 1983, p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> NORBERT HINSKE, *Che cosa significa e a quale fine si pratica la storia delle fonti? Alcune osservazioni di storia delle fonti sulla antinomia kantiana della libertà*, in «Studi Kantiani» XIX (2006), pp. 113-120.

<sup>3</sup> All quotes are from KGS=IMMANUEL KANT, *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1902-ff) cited by volumes and pages.

that presupposes the intervention of an agent. Aristotle uses the concept of spontaneity as *automatos* especially in his works on natural philosophy while as *ekoúsios* in his ethical treatises. Aristotle uses *automatos* only once in his ethical investigations in relation to the human action in the paragraphs 4 and 6 of the second book of the *Physica*. He writes that what happens for fortune or case is not necessary, it is accidental, and that accidental is something irrational because the reason is only in the necessary things. A spontaneous act is irrational and therefore accidental is also its result. Aristotle, however, specifies that fortune and casualness do not coincide. Fortune concerns the success of a practical action, i.e., of someone that has practical intellect. Aristotle denies fortune to animals and children because they are not able to plan actions, because they have no intelligence. The actions of animals and children are casual. Only this kind of accidental acts are called properly spontaneous.

Aristotle develops the moral concept of spontaneity as *ekoúsios* in the third book of the *Ethica Nicomachea*. The term is often translated in modern languages as voluntary but it differs meaningfully from voluntary as a result of the *boulé*.<sup>4</sup> In the first six paragraphs, Aristotle denotes the differences between *ekoúsios* and *bouleutós*. Aristotle begins to define the term *akousíos*, not-spontaneous, involuntary. He writes that «actions are involuntary when done (a) under compulsion or (b) through ignorance» (1109a 35-1110 a 1). An act done through ignorance is, for Aristotle, in any case not voluntary (1110 b 18). Compulsory act, *bíaios*, is a term to apply to any case in which «the cause of the action lies in things outside the agent and when the agent contributes nothing» (1110 b 1-3). Compulsory acts are for instance to be jailed or to be carried by the wind. The problem between voluntary and involuntary actions rises when for example a tyrant having a man's parents and children in his power commands him to do something to save their lives but if he refuses they will be put to death (1110 a 5-8). Aristotle defines these kinds of actions as mixed actions that are similar to voluntary actions. Spontaneous acts are when «the origin of the movement of the parts of the body instrumental to the act lies in the agent and when the origin of an action is in oneself, it is in one's own power to do it or not» (1110 a 12-17). Even if the principle of the action is in the agent, it does not choose guided by intelligence but case by case according to the opportune time (*kairós*). The result of the action is therefore accidental and not neces-

<sup>4</sup> The most exhaustive work on the differences among spontaneity, will and choice in Aristotle is: ANTHONY KENNY, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will*, London, Duckworth, 1979.

sary. In the third chapter Aristotle exhaustively defines spontaneous as «an act of which the origin lies in the agent, who knows the particular circumstances in which he is acting» (1111 a 22-24). He specifies that the behaviors of animals and children are spontaneous (*ekoúsios*), even if irrational. Irrationality is not opposed to spontaneity but to *prohaíresis*, which needs the intelligence. In 1111 b 6-10, Aristotle states that «choice is manifestly a spontaneous act but the two terms are not synonymous. Children and the lower animals as well as men are capable of spontaneous action, but not of choice. Also sudden acts may be termed spontaneous, but they cannot be said to be done by choice [...] The irrational animals do not exercise choice, but they feel desire and passion». In spontaneous acts the origin lies in the agent but they do not precede according to a order necessary for the choice. The suffix “pro” of *proaíresis* means the anteriority of the decision before the actions that is not possible in spontaneous acts.

## 2. The Evolution of the Aristotelian Concept of Spontaneity from Renaissance to Kant

Aristotle’s concept of spontaneity survives with few variances in the Middle Ages until the discussion on the servant and free will in the Renaissance.<sup>5</sup> Especially in Protestant theology in connection with Luther’s doctrines of predestination and grace, the Aristotelian theory of spontaneity does not give a satisfying answer. If deliberation depends on spontaneity and spontaneity is based on the internal dispositions of the agent, the agent acts in the worst or better way according to the internal dispositions. Causality of the agent in this way is necessary determined. Every spontaneous act is free *a coactione*, but having psycho-empirical presuppositions based on the human nature created by God is not free *a necessitate*. On this point the Catholic Roberto Bellarmino, in *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, clarifies that freedom is not *libertas a coactione* but *libertas a necessitate*. Otherwise, according to Bellarmino, human beings would be free like sheep when they go spontaneously to pasture.<sup>6</sup> A real

<sup>5</sup> On the history of concept of spontaneity see THOMAS S. HOFFMANN, *Spontaneität*, in JOACHIM RITTER (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel, Schwabe, 1988, X, pp. 1424-1434; WALTER WARNACH, OTTO H. PESCH AND ROBERT SPAEMANN, *Freiheit*, in JOACHIM RITTER (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel, Schwabe, 1972, II, pp. 1064-1098.

<sup>6</sup> ROBERTO BELLARMINO, *Opera omnia*, Napoli, Giuliano, 1856-62, III, p. 5.

voluntary act is possible only through the practical judgment for Belarmino, as in Aristotle.<sup>7</sup>

During the first half of the seventeenth century Calvinists as Adriaan Heereboord try to formulate an Aristotelian compatibilistic theory of freedom. The will is the last judgment of choice (*prohaíresis*), as a final step in the deliberation. In Heereboord's perspective the relation between choice and will is causal and at the same time necessary, like the relation between the instinct and the impulse to act in animals. Free actions are possible therefore through the will, but the will is not free because it depends necessary from practical intellect. If the practical intellect is enlightened by God, the will is good.<sup>8</sup> Other Protestant positions admit the *libertas indifferentiae* and re-contextualize the role of spontaneity. The main argument is that, if the will is necessary determined by the practical intellect, Lutherans and Calvinists reduce the free will to spontaneity, to the same a-moral faculty that the Catholic scholastic enemies attribute to animals. In opposition to the Lutherans, the catholic Luis Molina writes that freedom has two main meanings. The first improper meaning is *libertas a coactione* as *quod sponte fit, sive fiat naturali necessitate sive non*. This kind of freedom is not enough to found the free will because it reduces the condition of man to mere passivity. The specific condition of free will is *libertas a necessitate* and it is possible only if the will can decide whether to follow the practical intellect or not.<sup>9</sup>

Among philosophers, the theological disputes on the concept of spontaneity are investigated by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, especially in the *Initia et specimina scientiae novae generalis* and in the *Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*.<sup>10</sup> Aristotle's influence on the concept of spontaneity is very clear in

<sup>7</sup> The best reconstruction of the history of concept of spontaneity from Renaissance to Kant is FRANCESCO PIRO, *Spontaneità e ragion sufficiente*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2002, pp. 147-95.

<sup>8</sup> ADRIAAN HEEREBOORD, *Meletemata philosophica*, Nijmegen, Hoogenhuysen, 1664, II, pp. 49-61.

<sup>9</sup> LUIS DE MOLINA, *Concordia liberi arbitrii*, Oña and Madrid, Sapientia, 1953, pp. 10-14. On the concept of spontaneity in Molina and its reception in Leibniz see DIDIER KAPHAGAWANI, *Leibniz on Freedom and Determinism in Relation to Aquinas and Molina*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999; SEAN GREENBERG, *Leibniz against Molinism: Freedom, Indifference, and the Nature of the Will*, in DONALD RUTHERFORD AND JOHN A. COVER (eds.), *Leibniz: Nature and Freedom*, cit., pp. 217-33.

<sup>10</sup> A=GOTTFRIED WILHELM LEIBNIZ, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Darmstadt-Leipzig-Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1923-ff, cited by series, volume, page; GP=GOTTFRIED WILHELM LEIBNIZ, *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, Berlin, Weidmann, 1875-90, cited by volume, page.

the young Leibniz.<sup>11</sup> In the *Confessio Philosophi*, Leibniz states that «Aristotle defined spontaneous what is determined by an inner principle and free what is spontaneous but also determined by a choice».<sup>12</sup> In the letter to Stensen of 27 November 1677, Leibniz writes that «for the Ancients, spontaneous and free are different for the kind and for the specie, freedom is rational spontaneity»<sup>13</sup>. In the chapter “Systeme nouveau pour expliquer la nature des substances et leur communication entre elles, aussi bien que l’union de l’ame avec le corps” of the *Initia*, Leibniz summarizes his position on the problem of freedom stating that «freedom is spontaneity with intelligence».<sup>14</sup> Freedom is, Leibniz continues, spontaneity in animals and in other substances without intelligence while in human beings is more perfect and it is properly freedom. Leibniz resumes Aristotle’s distinction between spontaneity and freedom as *pro-hairesis* but he adds that «spontaneity is contingency without coercion, a spontaneous act is not something necessary or forced»<sup>15</sup>. Freedom as *libertas indifferentiae* is impossible for Leibniz, because a kind of freedom that has no reason to determinate the choice is unconceivable or conceivable only improperly. It would be as an action without cause.<sup>16</sup> Substances determined by inner principles are freer than the ones determined by external reason.<sup>17</sup> In mature writings as the *Théodicée* Leibniz articulates his theory of spontaneity more exhaustively. In paragraph 301 he states that «spontaneity of human actions is undoubtedly, if it is used Aristotle’s definition according to which a action is spontaneous when

<sup>11</sup> On the concept of spontaneity in Leibniz see DONALD RUTHERFORD, *Leibniz on Spontaneity*, in DONALD RUTHERFORD AND JOHN A. COVER (eds.), *Leibniz: Nature and Freedom*, cit., pp. 156-80; MICHAEL J. MURRAY, *Intellect, Will, and Freedom: Leibniz and His Precursors*, in «The Leibniz Review» VI (1996), pp. 25-60; MICHAEL J. MURRAY, *Spontaneity and Freedom in Leibniz*, in DONALD RUTHERFORD AND JOHN A. COVER (eds.), *Leibniz: Nature and Freedom*, cit., pp. 194-216. On Leibniz’s reception of Aristotelian doctrines see FRANCESCO PIRO, *Varietates identitate compensata: Studio sulla formazione della metafisica di Leibniz*, Napoli, Bibliopoli, 1990; FRANCESCO PIRO, *Leibniz et l’Ethique à Nicomaque*, in RENATO CRISTIN (ed.), *Leibniz und die Frage nach der Subjektivität*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1994, pp. 179-96; CHRISTIA MERCER, *Mechanizing Aristotle: Leibniz and Reformed Philosophy*, in MICHAEL ALEXANDER STEWART (ed.), *Studies in Seventeenth Century European Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 117-52; RICCARDO POZZO, *Leibniz’s on Aristotle Logic and Metaphysics*, in CHRISTOPH ASMUTH AND LISA WENDLANDT (eds.), *Nihil sine ratione*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2000, pp. 1020-27; CHRISTIA MERCER, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> A VI, pp. 3, 133.

<sup>13</sup> A VI, pp. 44, 1377.

<sup>14</sup> GP VII, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> GP VII, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> GP VI, p. 296.

<sup>17</sup> GP VII, p. 109.

the principle lies in the agent, *Spontaneum est, cuius principium est in agente...* the two conditions of freedom, on which Aristotle wrote, i.e., spontaneity and intelligence, are reunified in the power of choice». <sup>18</sup> According to Leibniz, spontaneity is one of the three requirements of the free act. The second requirement is intelligence and the last is contingency. Leibniz, reader of Bellarmino, tries to avoid in his theory of spontaneity *libertas a necessitate* by means of contingency. A free act is determined and inclined by its reasons but never necessitated; this is the reason why contingency is the third requirements of freedom.

Leibniz conceives spontaneity not only morally but also epistemologically. In the monads, every change happens according to an inner principle. <sup>19</sup> Spontaneity is therefore an attribute of reason, the origin of all representations and volitions. Conceiving spontaneity from this perspective, Leibniz has revolutionized the relation between the subject and the object of knowledge opening the way for the Kantian Copernican revolution and Idealism.

Through Leibniz, the Aristotelian concept of spontaneity becomes widespread in the German philosophy of the *Aufklärung*. Christian Wolff in the *Psychologia empirica* and in the *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, in Aristotelian wake, defines spontaneity as «*principium sese ad agendum determinandi intrinsecum*». <sup>20</sup> Spontaneity in the Aristotelian sense also plays a crucial role in the dispute on freedom and fatalism between Wolff and Joachim Lange. <sup>21</sup> Wolff defends himself from the accusation of Spinozism asserting that the spontaneity of the mind, i.e., the power of self-determination, guarantees the freedom of the agent. In the discussion, as Bruno Bianco has noted, both Lange and Wolff use Aristotle's example of *Metaphysica* 1047 a 17-19 of a man that wants to stand up from a chair as a specific kind of causality by freedom. Lange reduces this movement to mechanical necessary movement of the body without any agent's freedom, instead, in opposition Wolff interprets the movement as a result of a real spontaneity. Aristotle's example is very important because Kant deals with it in the *Anmerkung zur dritten Antinomie* to define what is a spontaneous act. He writes «if now, for example,

<sup>18</sup> GP VI, p. 296.

<sup>19</sup> GP VI, p. 607.

<sup>20</sup> CHRISTIAN WOLFF, *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, Halle, Regner, 1719, p. 317; CHRISTIAN WOLFF *Psychologia empirica*, Halle, Renger, 1738, p. 702.

<sup>21</sup> On Wolff-Lange dispute see BRUNO BIANCO, *Libertà e fatalismo. Sulla polemica tra Joachim Lange e Christian Wolff*, in «Verifiche» XV (1986), pp. 43-89.

completely freely and without any necessary determining influx of the natural causes, I stand up from my chair, from this event, considering also its natural consequences at infinite, begins in absolute sense a new series of events».<sup>22</sup> Kant uses the example to demonstrate that the absolute beginning of a spontaneous act is possible even if only in the series of the causes and not of the time.

In the first generations of Wolff's scholars the concept of spontaneity remains unchanged.<sup>23</sup> The most meaningful position is in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*, in which spontaneity is the faculty of the monad as «*vis repraesentativa pro positu corporis humani*».<sup>24</sup> Spontaneous souls are *autómata*, which confirms Baumgarten's reference to the Aristotelian notion of the spontaneous soul as *automaton spirituale*.<sup>25</sup> In his *Metaphysik*, Georg Friedrich Meier translates the Latin *spontaneitas* with *Selbsttätigkeit*.<sup>26</sup> Kant uses frequently the term *Selbsttätigkeit*, especially in the critical period, to denote the spontaneous activity. In the wake of the Aristotelian tradition is Joachim Georg Darjes, whom Giorgio Tonelli characterizes as Kant's source for the distinction Analytic-Dialectic of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.<sup>27</sup> In the chapter "Von der Monadologie im allgemeinen Sinne" of the *Elementa metaphysices*, Darjes defines spontaneity *principium entis efficiens intrinsecum* while in the *Philosophische Nebenstunden* he defines it as *Selbsttätigkeit*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> KGS III, A 450/B 478.

<sup>23</sup> See MARCO SGARBI, *Spontaneity from Leibniz to Kant. Sources and Studies*, in HERBERT BERGER, JÜRGEN HERBST, SVEN ERDNER (eds.), *Einheit in der Vielheit: XII. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress*, Hannover, Leibniz Gesellschaft 2006, 989-96.

<sup>24</sup> ALEXANDER G. BAUMGARTEN, *Metaphysica*, Halle, Hemmerde, 1756, pp. 176-77.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-74.

<sup>26</sup> GEORG F. MEIER, *Metaphysik*, Halle, Gebauer, 1755-7, §695-699.

<sup>27</sup> GIORGIO TONELLI, *Das Wiederaufleben der deutsch-aristotelischen Terminologie bei Kant*, in «Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte» IX (1964), pp. 233-242; GIORGIO TONELLI, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason within the Tradition of Modern Logic: A Commentary to its History*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> JOACHIM G. DARJES, *Elementa metaphysices*, Jena, Cuno, 1744, p. 307; JOACHIM G. DARJES, *Philosophischen Nebenstunden*, Jena, Gollner, 1749, p. 128.

### 3. Spontaneity in Kant's Early Writings

Just like Aristotle, Kant uses the concept of spontaneity in natural philosophy as well as in moral philosophy since his early pre-critical writings. Spontaneity in natural philosophy occurs, for instance, in the *Gedanken von der wahren Schätzung der lebendigen Kräfte*. In this work, Kant conceives spontaneity as an element of the phenomenal world. He states that each body has an original force, a *vis activa* that determines actions and representations.<sup>29</sup> In the §120 and §129 of the *Gedanken*, Kant clarifies that a body that has in itself the reason of its own actions is a body that preserves its movement freely and continuously to the infinite. Bodies that are able to determine themselves are spontaneous. Spontaneity is the life and the original activity of substances.<sup>30</sup>

Kant uses spontaneity in the moral sense for the first time in 1755 in the second part of the *Principiorum primorum cognitionis metaphysicae nova dilucidatio* in the chapter on the principle of determining reason. In the fourth proposition Kant writes: «to determine is to posit a predicate while excluding its opposite, that which determines a subject in respect of any of its predicates, is called the reason».<sup>31</sup> The reason is antecedently determining if it precedes that which is determined; it is consequentially determining when it would not be posited unless the concept which is determined by it had not already been posited from some other source. The former is the *ratio essendi* and determines the being and the becoming while the latter is the *ratio cognoscendi* and it explains the *quod*. Kant's problem in this section of the *Nova dilucidatio* is about the necessity and contingency of the events. The solution, according to Kant, is not in the investigation of the force or effectiveness of the necessitation, i.e., if a thing is more necessitated than another one, but the solution is in the principle of the necessitation. Kant exemplifies stating:

who is there who would doubt that the act of creation is not indeterminate in God, but that it is so certainly determinate that the opposite would be unworthy of God, in other words that the opposite could not be ascribed to Him at all. Nonetheless, however, the action is free, for it is determined by those reasons, which, in so far as they incline His will with the greatest possible certainty, include the motives of

<sup>29</sup> KGS I, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> KGS I, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> KGS I, p. 392.



His infinite intelligence, and do not issue from a certain blind power of nature to produce effects.<sup>32</sup>

The action of God in the creation is determined in a way that its opposite is unconceivable but this does not mean that the action is determined in a blind way by an external reason, but the action issues from God's inner principle, from his will and intelligence. Analogously, according to Kant, it happens to human actions:

in so far they are regarded as determinate, their opposites are indeed excluded; they are not, however, excluded by grounds which are posited as existing outside the desires and spontaneous inclinations of the subject, as if the agent were compelled to perform his actions against his will and as a result of a certain ineluctable necessity. On the contrary, it is in the very inclination of his volitions and desires, in so far as that inclination readily yields to the blandishments of his representations, that his actions are determined by a fixed law and in a connection which is most certain but also free.<sup>33</sup>

Human actions, even if determinate, preserve freedom because the principle of the action lies not in external reasons but in the spontaneous inclination of the agent. The difference between a physical determination and a moral action does not derive from a difference of bond but from the principle by means of which the action issues. It is the way in which the decision is taken that determines freedom. Actions are free, Kant writes, when they issue «by nothing other than motives of the understanding applied to the will, whereas in the case of brute animals or physico-mechanical actions everything is necessitated in conformity with external stimuli and impulses and without there being any spontaneous inclination of the will».<sup>34</sup> Kant illustrates the problem of spontaneity in the dialogue between Caius, advocate of *libertas indifferentiae*, and Titius, the champion of the determining reason. Caius affirms that humankind has been determined since the creation of the world and therefore it has not had the power to choose actions and so it is impossible to impute to humankind any guilt. Titius, in opposition, supports that «the series of interconnected reasons furnishes motives for the performance of the action which are equally attractive»,<sup>35</sup> and that the man, through the spontaneous inclination of his will, has chosen to adopt one of the sev-

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<sup>32</sup> KGS I, p. 400.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> KGS I, p. 402.

eral motives. Caius replies that the spontaneity means that the will could not have failed to incline for one motive or for another. According to Titius, the inclination of the will, far from eliminating spontaneity, makes spontaneity all the more certain because a spontaneous act issues from an inner principle. Kant uses the Aristotelian concept of spontaneity thematized by Leibniz. Kant adds that when «spontaneity is determined in conformity with the representation of what is best it is called freedom».<sup>36</sup> In the critical period the representation of what is best, the moral law, issues from the same freedom and therefore freedom and spontaneity coincide.<sup>37</sup> According to Titius's theory of spontaneity, human actions are not unavoidable, they are, however, bound to happen, given the inclination of the desire relative to the situation as they are constituted. To act freely is not excluded by the law of the determining reason because to be free means to act in conformity with one's desire and consciousness. Kant adds that if

intelligent beings were to comport themselves passively in relation to those things which impel towards certain determinations and changes, as it happens in the case of machines, it would be impossible to deny that God is guilty for all things as the Architect of the machine. But those things which happen through the will of beings endowed with understanding and the spontaneity of the self-determination obviously issue from an inner principle, from conscious desires and from a choice of one of the alternatives according to the freedom of the power of choice.<sup>38</sup>

Human beings differ from all the other animals without intelligence since their actions are not in the series of determinations of an unavoidably natural determinism. Human beings are not machines, they have the faculty, by means of spontaneity, to self-determine themselves on the different alternatives.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> The moral law in the critical period can be called only improperly representation because it issues spontaneously from reason and it is not an object of knowledge. Kant's conception of moral law as representation is a survival of Baumgarten's concept of spontaneity as *vis repraesentativa* that in it self-determination provides for the motives of the action. The terminology of the moral law as representation survives until the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. For example in the *Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten*, Kant writes «die Vorstellung eines objectiven Prinzips, sofern es für einen Willen nötigend ist, heißt ein Gebot (der Vernunft) und die Formel des Gebots heißt Imperativ (IV, 413)». See also PAOLA RUMORE, *L'ordine delle idee: La genesi del concetto di "rappresentazione" in Kant attraverso le sue fonti wolffiane (1747-1787)*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> KGS I, p. 404.

#### 4. Kant's Concept of Spontaneity in the Critical Period

In the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, spontaneity plays a crucial role in a number of epistemological issues: 1) the spontaneity of the understanding is opposed to the receptivity of sensibility; 2) the faculty of synthesis is spontaneous; 3) pure apperception is a spontaneous activity.<sup>39</sup> With regard to moral issues, the most relevant passage is certainly the “third antinomy.”<sup>40</sup> In *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, Henry E. Allison points out that the third antinomy is not only the locus of the major discussion of freedom in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, but also the basis for Kant's subsequent treatment of freedom in his writings on moral philosophy.<sup>41</sup> In the third antinomy, freedom and causality are the matter of a contradiction of reason with itself. The thesis asserts that «causality in accordance with laws of nature is not the only one from which all the appearances of the world can be derived. It is also necessary to assume another causality through freedom in order to explain them» (A444/B472).<sup>42</sup> Supposing the existence of a causality that were solely ruled by laws of nature, all that happens would presuppose a preceding cause, which would follow the laws of nature. Therefore, using a typical Aristotelian claim, if every cause had a cause, it would be impossible to determine the first cause. However the law of causality must have a determinate cause a-priori, or nothing could happen. It is necessary to admit an unconditioned cause, i.e., a kind of absolute spontaneity (*absolute Spontaneität*) capable to begin from itself the phenomenal series of events according to the natural law. Kant calls such absolute spontaneity as transcendental freedom (*transzendente Freiheit*), without which no series of phenomena would be completed. As a power that begins from it-self a series of events without any other cause, spontaneity must be postulated

<sup>39</sup> On spontaneity in Kant's theoretical philosophy see INGEBORG HEIDEMANN, *Der Begriff der Spontaneität in der Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in «Kant-Studien» LXVII (1955/56), pp. 3-30; ROBERT PIPPIN, *Kant on the Spontaneity of Mind*, in «Canadian Journal of Philosophy» XVII (1987), pp. 449-76; WOLFGANG CARL, *Apperception and Spontaneity*, in «International Journal of Philosophical Studies» V (1997) pp. 1147-63.

<sup>40</sup> On the concept of spontaneity in the “Third Antinomy” see ANDREAS GUNKEL, *Spontaneität und moralische Autonomie*, Bern-Stuttgart, Haupt, 1989; KATSUTOSHI KAWAMURA, *Spontaneität und Willkür*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1996. Kawamura book is the best work on the history of concept of spontaneity from Wolff to Kant but unfortunately it does not deal with spontaneity in the critical period after the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

<sup>41</sup> HENRY E. ALLISON, *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> KGS I, p. 18.

and is not demonstrable. The antithesis of the third antinomy states instead that «there is no freedom, but everything in the world happens solely in accordance with laws of nature».<sup>43</sup> If spontaneity were the solely absolute cause of every state and every event, it would also be the cause of self-determination, i.e., the cause of its causality. A state must exist in which a subject is not already in acting. This state cannot be in nature, it must be out of the world, therefore everything in the sensible world happens under the laws of nature.

Spontaneity is for Kant a real stumbling block for philosophy. According to Kant, spontaneity should not be attributed to substances in the world, for in this case the connection of appearances in accordance with universal laws (by means of which it is possible to distinguish experience from dreaming), would disappear.<sup>44</sup> Heinz Heimsoeth, in the article *Zum kosmotheologischen Ursprung der Kantischen Freiheitsantinomie*, suggests an original interpretation of the thesis and the antithesis of the third antinomy as the conflict between the two biggest philosophical approaches to human freedom in history. On the side of thesis there are Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Leibniz, who support the absolute spontaneity or a first cause. On the other side are Epicurus, Spinoza, Hume and Priestley, who deny any possibility of freedom. Heimsoeth contextualizes Kant in the same philosophical tradition of Aristotle but not for the concept of spontaneity but for the notion of “first mover.”<sup>45</sup>

In the “Resolution of the cosmological idea of the totality of the derivation of the occurrences in the world from their causes,” Kant goes a step further and maintains that regarding to all that happens there are only two kinds of causality, the one according to nature and the one according to freedom. Under natural causality he understands the cause-effect relations of the phenomena under the spatio-temporal conditions of the experience. In the cosmological sense, hence freedom is the power of beginning a state from itself, i.e., the power, the causality of which does not in turn stand under another cause determining it in time in accordance with laws of nature.<sup>46</sup> This account of freedom does not concern the phenomenal world, it is part of the transcendental idea of a reason that can act from itself without any previous cause. Kant creates a metaphysical space for the subject out of the conditions of space and

<sup>43</sup> KGS III, A 445/B 473.

<sup>44</sup> KGS III, A 451/B 479.

<sup>45</sup> HEINZ HEIMSOETH, *Zum kosmotheologischen Ursprung der Kantischen Freiheitsantinomie*, in «Kant-Studien» LVI (1966), pp. 206-29.

<sup>46</sup> KGS III, A 533/B 561.

time. The problem that arises is whether transcendental freedom itself may determine phenomenal subjects or not. Transcendental freedom differs from practical freedom in so far as the latter is the mere independence of the will from external constrictions. Kant calls a pathologically affected will *arbitrium brutum*, the typical power of choice of inferior beings. A will affected by sensible representations he calls *arbitrium sensitivum*, the power of choice of higher animals. The power of choice of human beings is *arbitrium sensitivum liberum*, for sensibility does not necessarily imply an immediate reaction. It is by means of spontaneity that human beings are capable of self-determination independently from the constrictions of external impulses and able to execute actions.<sup>47</sup> Spontaneity is necessary, for if all causality in the *mundus sensibilis* were mere nature, then every occurrence would be determined in time by another in accord with necessary laws and every action issued from the power of choice would be necessary. Abolishing transcendental freedom would simultaneously eliminate practical freedom. A causality capable of producing effects entirely from itself must exist independently from natural causes and even against their forces, as something determined in the temporal series of occurrences.<sup>48</sup> How is the coexistence of these two kinds of causality possible? In the chapter on the “Possibility of causality through freedom unified with the universal law of natural necessity,” Kant remarks that in the transcendental investigation of freedom each subject has a twofold character: 1) phenomenal or sensible; 2) noumenal or intelligible. Each subject, then, is intelligible in its actions and sensible in its effects. The intelligible character is the cause of all actions, in so far as they are phenomena, it is not determined by any spatio-temporal condition, however, and it is therefore the only proper thing to be free. Kant concludes that transcendental freedom is part of the intelligible character, which begins its effects in the sensible world from itself.<sup>49</sup>

In the *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können* Kant delves into spontaneity in paragraph 52. If the subject is conceived of as a phenomenon and thus as part of the chain of the occurrences of the world, the contradiction of the third antinomy seems insolvable. It is solvable, however, if natural necessity is attributed to the phenomena and freedom is attributed to the things in itself. Kant points out that in the phenomenal world events must

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<sup>47</sup> KGS III, A 534/B 562.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> KGS III, A 541/B 569.

have a cause. For freedom to be such a cause, it ought to be a power of «starting those events from itself (*sponte*) [spontaneously], i.e., without the causality of the cause itself having to begin, and hence without need for any other ground to determine its beginning».<sup>50</sup> The distinction between transcendental and practical freedom is also discussed in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. In the *Grundlegung*, the will and the practical reason coincide. The will is the power of choice, which practical reason, i.e. the will in itself independently from sensible inclination, recognizes as necessary. The actions issue from self-determination, spontaneous actions are expression of objective laws. Kant defines the objective laws of self-determination as imperatives. If spontaneity of reason were not the principle of actions and if the latter were determined only from sensible inclinations, then they would be the expression of subjective laws of necessity.<sup>51</sup>

Spontaneity is the kind of causality that is proper to rational beings and the real expression of the ontology of the transcendental subject. Kant believes that mankind has in itself the faculty to differ from all other things, which is reason. As pure spontaneous activity, reason raises above the spontaneity of the understanding. The understanding is spontaneous in the synthesis of judgments, while dealing, however, only with representations that arise when it is affected by things. It cannot produce from itself any other concepts than the ones that serve to bring sensible representations under rules and to unite them in one consciousness. Reason is instead so pure that it goes far beyond anything that sensibility can ever afford. Kant adds that because of spontaneity a rational being must regard itself as intelligent and thus as belonging to the *mundus intelligibilis* and not to the *mundus sensibilis*.<sup>52</sup> Spontaneity thus becomes the foundation of the sensible world and of its laws. Every rational action is spontaneous because reason chooses the laws from itself, in accordance with its full autonomy.

In the footnote of the preface to the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, Kant writes that «freedom is indeed the *ratio essendi* of the moral law and the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom».<sup>53</sup> It is clear from Kant's ethical development that freedom as the *ratio essendi* of the moral law requires for a moral action to be truly moral if and only if it

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<sup>50</sup> KGS IV, p. 344.

<sup>51</sup> KGS IV, p. 413.

<sup>52</sup> KGS IV, p. 452.

<sup>53</sup> KGS V, p. 5.

has its origin in the pure spontaneity of reason. The problem is whether the moral law could be the *ratio cognoscendi* of human freedom. The fundamental law of pure practical reason commands acting in order that the maxim of one's will could always hold as the principle of a universal law.<sup>54</sup> The moral law can be fulfilled in three ways: 1) according to spontaneity (the only moral way); 2) according to desire; 3) casually. From the sensible world there are no ways to infer something about the intelligible world, not even to know whether the cause of the actions is spontaneity of reason, or desire, or fate. Experience of freedom is always phenomenal. The existence of freedom, as Kant has already explained in the resolution of the third antinomy, must be presupposed, its essence, however, is unknowable. Due to a mere analysis of actions, there is no difference between morality and legality. The moral law cannot be the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, not even in its formality as non-contradictory product of reason, for it would presuppose what it must demonstrate, namely the pure spontaneity of reason. Kant is aware of the impossibility of proving the existence of freedom from the moral law. Transcendental freedom, just like the immortality of the soul and God's existence, is a transcendental idea of reason. Practical reason provides spontaneity with objective reality. In the introduction to the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, Kant establishes two main activities of reason in its practical use. Reason is namely concerned with the determining grounds of the will as 1) the faculty of producing objects that correspond to representations; 2) the faculty of self-determination. The first use considers reason as the faculty capable of producing objects, and not simply as the faculty by means of which representations are subsumed under categories of the understanding. The second use deals with the power of determining actions spontaneously, i.e., independently from any inclination. The precise task of the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* consists in withdrawing reason from its empirical conditionings and showing it as a pure spontaneous faculty. In the division of the book, Kant maintains the format of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* of letting a doctrine of the elements be followed by a doctrine of the method. The doctrine of elements is divided into analytic and dialectic. In the analytic of practical reason, however, Kant inverts the order of the first critique and deals first with the principles and second with the concepts. The fundamental reason of such inversion is that the primary object of the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* is the analysis of the will as causality and of its a-priori principles. It is

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<sup>54</sup> KGS V, p. 30.

only by means of an investigation of spontaneity as a first practical pure principle that it is possible to provide a foundation of the critique of pure practical reason. The will can be determined either by subjective principles or by universal laws that are valid for each rational being. Were the will determined by merely practical reasons, i.e., were it always conditioned subjectively, then all practical principles would be nothing more than simple maxims. On the other hand, if the will were determined only by imperatives dictated by spontaneity of reason, it would be a holy will. Kant presents the lower faculty of desire as the determining reason of all material practical rules. The lower faculty of desire is not interested in which ways the pleasure is fulfilled, it focuses its attention instead exclusively on the object and the power the object has of satisfying the human subject's demands. On the contrary, reason, the higher faculty of desire, determines from itself the will and does not ground its action on sensible representations. Pure spontaneity is the autonomy of the will as the sole principle of all moral laws and of the duties in keeping with them.<sup>55</sup> The autonomy of pure practical reason is the formal condition, the *ratio essentiali* of all maxims that they become moral laws.

In the "Deduction of the Principles of Pure Practical Reason," Kant writes that the idea of freedom as an autonomous power of absolute spontaneity is not needed for the determination of the causality of all beings in the sensible world (which can never be unconditioned), for it is an analytical principle, without which each moral action would not be possible.<sup>56</sup> Spontaneity does not concern the *mundus sensibilis*, although it is the real *causa noumenon* of free will. The chapter on the "Incentives of pure practical reason," describes spontaneity as the essential cause by means of which the moral law legislates and the will is determined. Kant asserts that the essence of every moral value of actions is the result of the spontaneous determination of will.<sup>57</sup> This means that the spontaneity of reason (the transcendental freedom which gives foundation to the moral law) immediately determines the will. While investigating the relations between the will and practical judgment, Kant makes it clear that «the moral law determines the will objectively and immediately in judgment of reason».<sup>58</sup> An immediate decision would imply the exclusion of any possible choice, for it would deny in this sense any possible reflection.

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<sup>55</sup> KGS V, p. 33.

<sup>56</sup> KGS V, p. 48.

<sup>57</sup> KGS V, p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> KGS V, p. 78.



Kant's spontaneous judgments (which are indeed moral judgments) are very far from Aristotle's practical syllogism, which provide the basis for deducting a choice. Spontaneous judgments deny any deduction; they are an automatic decision in accordance with the moral law. The transcendental freedom determines actions without any possible choice a priori, by means of the moral law.

In the "Critical elucidation of the analytic of pure practical reason," Kant explains that practical reason «does not have to do with objects for the sake of cognizing them but with its own ability to make them» spontaneously.<sup>59</sup> If in theoretical philosophy spontaneity was essentially fulfilling a synthetic function, in practical philosophy it has become a productive activity on its own. Kant's concept of spontaneity as a productive activity is the foundation of Idealism and it explains special interests of idealistic philosopher in Kantian moral philosophy.<sup>60</sup> Kant clarifies his position on spontaneity in polemical reference to both empirical and psychological notions of freedom. Freedom can be attributed to rational beings only from transcendental standpoint as *causa noumenon*. It is not possible to explain freedom according to empirical principles. Spontaneity must be a transcendental predicate of the causality of a being that belongs to the sensible world, without which the disclosure of an intelligible world and the moral law in itself are not possible. Kant criticizes the definition of spontaneity as

the determining natural ground of which lies within the acting being, e.g., as a projectile accomplishes when it is in free motion because while it is in flight it is not impelled from without; or as the motion of a clock that is free because it moves the hands itself and they do not need to be pushed externally; in the same way the actions of the human being, although they are necessary by their determining grounds which preceded them in time, are yet called free because the actions are caused from within, by representations produced by our own powers, whereby desires are evoked on occasion of circumstances and hence actions are produce at our own discretion.<sup>61</sup>

Freedom in this sense would be a miserable expedient from which many philosophers were blandished. It is not important to know whether actions are determined from inside or outside. If the determining reasons

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<sup>59</sup> KGS V, p. 89.

<sup>60</sup> On the reception of Kant's concept of spontaneity in idealistic philosophy see HENRY E. ALLISON, *Idealism and Freedom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; KARL AMERIKS, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>61</sup> KGS V, p. 96.

are inner representations, always determinable in the time, human beings are psychologically affected and necessitated. All necessity of the events in time and in accordance with the natural law of causality is the mechanism of the nature. If the agent were determined by matter it would be an *automaton materiale*, whereas if it were determined by representations it would be an *automaton spirituale*. If human freedom were none other than these two kinds of determinations, then «it would at bottom be nothing better than the freedom of a turnspit, which, when once it is wound up, also accomplishes its movements of itself».<sup>62</sup> Kant criticizes Leibniz for not seeing any qualitative difference between *phenomena* and *noumena*, between the sensible and the intelligible character. Natural necessity cannot coexist with the subject's freedom under the same respect and under spatio-temporal determinations.

The role played by spontaneity in Kant's practical philosophy cannot be underestimated. In fact, using Kant's own words, «if it were possible for us to have a deep insight into a human being's cast of mind, then we would become aware that the whole chain of appearances, with respect to all that the moral law is concerned with, depends upon the spontaneity of the subject as a thing in itself, for the determination of which no physical explanation can be given».<sup>63</sup>

## 5. Kant and Aristotle on Spontaneity: A Critical Balance

The Aristotelian concept of spontaneity is, as I have demonstrated, the core of the Kant's moral philosophy. Spontaneity is the only way to avoid the circular problem of the autonomy of reason and the moral law because both are based on it. Spontaneity as a special kind of causality is the only element that permits to elaborate the metaphysics of moral.

It is impossible to establish whether Kant, in his theory of spontaneity, has Aristotle as direct reference, but surely he knows about the transformation of the Aristotelian concept in Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten and Meier. Kant's use of Baumgarten and Meier's books in his lectures is well known as well as his reading of Leibniz, Wolff and Crusius is well documented.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> KGS V, p. 97.

<sup>63</sup> KGS V, p. 99.

<sup>64</sup> The *Vorlesungsverzeichnisse* of the university of Königsberg are a precious source to know the circulation of books and ideas in Kant's time. See MICHEAL OBERHAUSEN and RICCARDO POZZO,

Studies on the history of the idea of freedom, as Jerome B. Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy*, do not mention Aristotle as sources of the concept of spontaneity in modern moral philosophy. Schneewind in his outstanding book suggests for instance a possible derivation from the political thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries or that the concept is something new in the history of thought.<sup>65</sup> Neither the recent book of Ulrike Santozki, *Die Bedeutung antiker Theorien für die Genese und Systematik von Kants Philosophie* deals with Aristotle in the reconstruction of Kant's ethics. Instead, she focuses her attention especially on the relation with the Stoic theories.<sup>66</sup> The only meaningful investigation on the relation between Kant and Aristotle in the field of ethics is Alfredo Ferrarin's *Saggezza, Immaginazione e giudizio pratico*, in which he declares, however, that Kant does not know Aristotle, that there are no clues of any knowledge of Aristotelian doctrines in his writings and above all that Kant does not show any interest to know them.<sup>67</sup> In opposition to these interpretations I believe that Aristotle's influence on Kant ought to be reconsidered and that the concept of spontaneity was a good starting point.

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*Vorlesungsverzeichnisse der Universität Königsberg (1720-1804)*, Stuggart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1999.

<sup>65</sup> JEROME B. SCHNEEWIND, *The Invention of Autonomy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1998, p. 483.

<sup>66</sup> ULRIKE SANTOZKI, *Die Bedeutung antiker Theorien für die Genese und Systematik von Kants Philosophie*, New York, De Gruyter, 2006, pp. 149-227.

<sup>67</sup> ALFREDO FERRARIN, *Saggezza, immaginazione e giudizio pratico*, Pisa, ETS, 2004, p. 64.

**Abstract:**

In *Kant über Freiheit als Autonomie*, Gerold Prauss suggests that in the middle of the 1760's beside Rousseau's influence on the concept of freedom in Kant's moral writings, it is possible to find also the Aristotelian notion of spontaneity. The aim of the paper is to contextualize by means of the methodology of the *Quellengeschichte* Kant's concept of spontaneity within the tradition of Aristotelian ethics. In the first part of the paper I analyze Aristotle's concept of spontaneity and in the second its reception from Renaissance to Kantian philosophy. The third and fourth parts deal with spontaneity in Kant's moral writings with the exemption of the *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, which involves and implies a much larger set of considerations on teleology and metaphysics. The conclusion is a critical assessment of Kant's appropriation of Aristotle's spontaneity.